

THE PENINSULA OF MISSOURI AS A WINTER HOME
FOR BIRDS.

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A LIST of 47 species of birds, found around Cardwell, the present terminus of the Buffalo Island R. R., Dunklin Co., Mo., January 14-18, 1896, not only reflects the woodland character of the region, but also illustrates the great advantages of heavily timbered lowland for the winter sojourn of certain birds in a comparatively cold climate.

Every winter snow covers the ground to a depth of several inches for a whole fortnight, and all the watercourses, including the St. Francis River itself, are closed for a like period with an ice sheet several inches thick. The mercury is pretty sure to go as low as 10° , and in severe winter even falls to -10° , but as a rule the cold squalls last only a few days.

With the exception of a narrow ridge, called Grand Prairie, which separates the Little River from the St. Francis basin, the whole region is covered with original forest, and farming is done in clearings and deadenings, situated within this forest. On the railroad line saw mills have been erected, and the best lumber, especially oak, is now being cut out; but in a region like this, where lumber is so abundant, only the most valuable part of a tree is sawed off and taken to the mill; all the rest is left to decay where it fell. Many trees, having been cut green, retain the dry foliage throughout the winter.

In their slow decay the huge treetops, covering several square rods of ground and thus keeping off the browsing cattle, allow the weeds, briars and blackberry brambles to grow in profusion. Rich soil, combined with an abundance of moisture and sunlight, form in a few years the most impenetrable thickets, whose depths are accessible to hardly anything else but small birds, and for these they afford an unexcelled resort at night and in inclement weather, providing safety, shelter and food. The heavy cover protects not only birds, but also vegetation and lower animal life, and the carpet of green grasses, ferns and a variety of hardy plants, which

is spread over the floor of the forest, is much richer under these treetops.

Such is an outline of the locality where numberless flocks of several kinds of Fringillidæ spend their winter in pleasing harmony and apparently in the best possible state of mind and body. Even when the rain is coming down in a continuous drizzle all day long the birds in these woods are not only busy and active, but also contented and happy; and on a day, which to ordinary persons seemed the gloomiest possible "we" and the birds were the happiest crowd.

Especially the Fox Sparrow (*Passerella iliaca*) deserves the highest praise for exhibiting the most undisturbable good humor; all day long, and more than ever in the dusk of evening, his melodious voice goes through the leafless woods. It is not their full whistle, which we hear in spring, but enough of it to show how happy they are and enough to make others happy, too.

It is a common thing to see a couple of Peabody-birds (*Zonotrichia albicollis*) take up the thread of musical notes where the other lets it drop, hold it up for others who spin it out for quite a while, until the stentorian voice of Mr. Pipilo falls in and cuts it short with his *to-whoes*.

All these birds are never so cheerful where only a few are together. They feel much safer and easier in a crowd, because the trying work of constant vigilance is divided among so many, and there is no doubt that they really enjoy the company of others of their kind, and of birds with similar habits, though of different genera, and even other families.

The most abundant member of the Sparrow family in these woods is undoubtedly the White-throated Sparrow or Peabody-bird. It does not occur in small parties of half a dozen or so, as it does in the counties bordering the Missouri River, 250 miles farther north. Though there may be only a few chirps in the underbrush when you pass by, enter their recesses and you will see them rise from all sides, and you may count 50 before you get through. It is a phlegmatic bird, not easily alarmed, and keeps sitting in the trees and bushes to give you time for your arithmetic. The Fox Sparrows are second in numbers and very often go up with the White-throats, but as a rule they are more partial to moist ground.

At the other side, on the higher levels, where corn and cotton fields occupy a part of the ground, the immense flocks of Juncos (*Junco hyemalis*) join those of the Peabody-birds, and they in turn are often flanked by jolly troops of Tree Sparrows (*Spizella monticola*) and Goldfinches (*Spinus tristis*).

The numerous Pipilos (*Pipilo erythrophthalmus*) associate with the Fox Sparrows and Peabody-birds in the woods, but the Cardinals (*Cardinalis cardinalis*) keep company to all; they are in the deep woods along the sloughs, as well as in the openings along the fences. Their loud song is familiar to all; it wakes the sleepers at the earliest dawn and falls unexpectedly upon the ear in seemingly deserted regions.

The Song and Swamp Sparrows (*Melospiza fasciata* and *M. georgiana*) do not form flocks by themselves, but are scattered in small parties and help to swell the throng of kindred souls.

It is a blessed region where we can listen to the sweet notes of all these songsters in deepest winter, in rain, in sleet and snow; and the dreaded season has lost its terrors of loneliness and desolation, where such true friends of song and happy companionship have made their winter home.

Though the Sparrow family forms the gross of the camping army in the woods, we are every now and then reminded of the fact that we are in a country, with a climate which the Thrasher (*Harporynchus rufus*) finds not too cold to endure winter's longest nights and on food rich enough to find a sufficiency in its shortest days. Although he does his best to elude the gaze of the intruder, his conspicuous size does not admit of much success in this endeavor, and we must class him among the best known birds of the region at this season. Happy he who gets a chance to hear the great composer tune his latest thoughts at half-voice in the bushes; his Easter cantata is not ready yet, but long before spring has come to northern climes the Peninsula Thrasher will mount his favorite perch and proclaim in his exquisitely melodious way that within himself the hope for an early resurrection of love's sweet season is growing with each day.

A unique sight met my eye on Jan. 15: a Thrasher with a pure white nape, an area about one and a half inches wide, but running to a point on the side of the neck, almost encircling it.

At this same day and place another rarity was found: a Cat-bird (*Galeoscoptes carolinensis*), feeding quietly among the leaves on the ground, and after a while flying up into a hackberry tree to partake of a few berries. Besides the white-naped Thrasher its nearest neighbors were the usual congregation of Fox Sparrows, Pipilos, Cardinals, Song Sparrows, etc.

Two other members of the Wren family constitute an important ingredient of the bird fauna of this region, and, though of small and even diminutive size, contribute greatly to the enjoyment of the visitor by their sprightly actions, confiding ways and pleasing notes. I mean the Carolina Wren (*Thryothorus ludovicianus*) and the Winter Wren (*Troglodytes hiemalis*). While the former, as a native of the soil, is the real owner of the ground and tells all who come and at all times of day and year that his title is as good as any title on decaying logs and debris ever was, he leases part of his domain to his little cousin from the north, who takes it regularly for just six months, from October 1 to April 1.

Though it seems liberal enough to thus divide an old estate with a distant relative, the lord and owner of the ground takes care to keep the higher levels for himself, and our little brownie has to put up with the watery regions of the slough and overflow. Here he is, during all his stay, as much at home as in his northern woods in summer. He, who knows him only from his flying visits, is most agreeably surprised to see he has a voice not only for a scold, but also for a praise, a rich, long song which is in perfect harmony with his surroundings. With this song he announces his arrival in October and gives it with increased vigor long before he leaves in spring. He is on friendly terms with his solemn neighbor, the Hermit Thrush (*Turdus aonalaschke pallasii*) who, like him, has a predilection for the overflow, and who, like him, is silent when away from home. He must regard this region as a kind of home, since he greets it with his most tender strains on his return in the fall, and sings aloud before he leaves it for the north.

In spite of near relationship the Robin (*Merula migratoria*) is an entirely different sort of winter boarder in this region. He does not hide from morning until night; nor does he look about for ages before he takes a heart to speak out what he thinks. You

can hear him when he comes, and he does not come alone; nor does he stay in one particular place until he becomes a bore; he comes in jolly troops, feeds, sings and goes.

While the Wrens and Thrushes keep company to the scratching Sparrows on the ground, the Paridæ and Picidæ populate the trees from root to highest tip.

Of Woodpeckers there are seven species in these woods, the Downy (*Dryobates pubescens*), the Hairy (*D. villosus*), the Flicker (*Colaptes auratus*), the Sapsucker (*Sphyrapicus varius*), the Red-belly (*Melanerpes carolinus*), the Redhead (*M. erythrocephalus*), and the Pileated (*Ceophlæx pileatus*).

Though the Redheads are oftener seen in the deadenings than in the deep forest, all seven species are so plentifully and thoroughly distributed over the woods that it has actually occurred that all seven species were together on near trees in front of me at one and the same moment.

As a rule the Sapsuckers are by far the least, the Redbellies the most talkative of the family, but all are making some noise, hammering or calling, and there is not a minute throughout the day when one or the other cannot be heard.

Less scattered, and therefore not quite so omnipresent, are the Paridæ. They are, besides, more under the influence of the weather. For some reasons, probably best known to their dressmaker, they dislike damp weather, which makes them somewhat morose; but they are quick to respond to the exhilarating effect of a high barometer with its bright skies and frosty mornings.

As usual the three Paridæ, *Parus bicolor*, *P. carolinensis*, and *Sitta carolinensis*, are mostly found associated with a few representatives of kindred folks, especially *Certhia familiaris americana* and *Regulus satrapa*, both of which are common winter sojourners in these beautiful woods.

Only once observed was *Sitta canadensis*, apparently a stranger to the region; but a bird, whose abundance at this time was not expected, is the Ruby-crowned Kinglet (*Regulus calendula*), which was found in all places visited and in all sorts of company, several times with Yellow-rumps (*Dendroica coronata*). There is not much poison ivy growing in these woods, but wherever there

is some, we hear the *chuck* of the Yellow-rump and see a few of the sprightly, restless birds.

Not a single Crow was to be seen in this country, and Blackbirds were among the rarities. The barnyard is the only place where a troop of Rusties (*Scolecophagus carolinus*) is likely to be seen on a midwinter's day and a few stray Redwings (*Agelaius phoeniceus*) may be encountered in the clearings.

Though not very numerous here in summer the Bluejay (*Cyanocitta cristata*) is now one of the most abundant and conspicuous birds. They seem to have come from the north in search of health: they go about their work singly, but hold frequent meetings for sundry purposes and may often be seen gesticulating and complimenting each other on their good appearance and healthy looks, and truly they seem to feel uncommonly well.

The Bobwhite (*Colinus virginianus*) also is an inmate of the woods where he has his favorite resting places under fallen tree-tops.

The Wild Turkey (*Meleagris gallopavo*) is still a pretty common bird in this comparatively wild region, where cornfields, blackberry thickets and cypress-swamps join each other in all directions. In the cornfield he finds some of his food, in the thickets a retreat, and in the swamps a roost. He is not known to roost anywhere else but above water and if the weather is not too bad he retires to the higher branches.

Ducks are unusually rare in the region this winter and three Hooded Mergansers (*Lophodytes cucullatus*) were all the Water Birds met with.

The total absence of Ducks is generally accounted for by lack of food and superabundance of water. One of the main articles of their diet is the seed of smartweed, but the crop of the high southern smartweed (*Polygonum densiflorum*) has been an entire failure. The plant came up slowly last summer, probably in consequence of the unusually severe winter of 1894-95, and it was in full bloom when the frosts of the first October days visited the region. Though no bad effect was visible at the time, the frost seems to have checked fructification.

The clearings and deadenings, enclosed as they are by the forest, do not change the character of the country greatly, but

they harbor a few species which are not found in the forest itself, and the Hawks and Owls resort to them for preying upon the rodents, which infest the corn and cotton fields.

In such clearings we have repeatedly heard the cheerful carols of Bluebirds (*Sialia sialis*) and in view of our experience with the species last spring, we are doubly glad to hear them. Does not each note contain a promise of extraordinary value? Is it not as if a real treasure, already given up as lost, is to be restored to us again?

On a solitary tree in the field sits a solitary Shrike, and higher up on top of an old stump a male Sparrow Hawk; he is busy-ing himself with something, but fearing approach he leaves and takes with him his prey—a woodrat. On a distant tree an old Redshoulder (*Buteo lineatus*) holds a look-out for the benefit of the farmer and over a particularly odoriferous spot six Turkey Vultures (*Cathartes aura*) are drawing closer and closer circles, apparently intent on an early descent upon the remains of one of the farmer's special pets.

A small troop of Meadowlarks (*Sturnella magna*) is changing its field of labor to another part of the big cornfield, and from the old rail fence comes a harsh, shrike-like, note: it is the expression of surprise on the part of a Mockingbird. Before we turn to leave we get a glimpse of the only Purple Finch (*Carpodacus purpureus*) met with in this region, and following the fence a flock of at least one hundred small birds is seen going up from the cornfield as if at a word of command. They are mostly Juncos and Goldfinches, but we also identify a few Field Sparrows (*Spizella pusilla*), a species which we found only at three or four places and in small numbers.

Still watching the host of frightened Fringillidæ we learn the cause of the stampede, a Barred Owl (*Syrnium nebulosum*), abroad in the middle of the afternoon, but apparently occupied with thoughts of a defensive, rather than of an offensive nature.